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Playing the Game of News Leaks

Leaking secrets to the press for political advantage is one of Washington's oldest games, but lately things seem to have gotten out of hand. In recent weeks details of the new U.S. nuclear strategy, the stealth aircraft, the shortage of plutonium for nuclear warheads and the combat shortcomings of six Army divisions have all turned up in the media. There are even phony leaks: last week, several news organizations received copies of a memo, purportedly signed by national-security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, urging U.S. intelligence agencies to spy on U.S. black groups. Some of the leaks seem designed to enhance President Carter's re-election chances; others seem to have come from his political foes. "Classified information has become the currency of the political campaign," says a White House aide.

The stealth leaks first appeared in Aviation Week and The Washington Post and were finally confirmed by Defense Secretary Harold Brown. Did the Administration arrange the leak to counteract GOP charges that Carter was soft on defense? Testifying before a House subcommittee last week, former Chief of Naval Operations Elmo Zumwalt said that sources "in the Pentagon and the White House" told him that Carter himself had ordered the disclosure, thus giving Brown the opportunity to confirm it. Zumwalt even claimed he knew the source of the leak: deputy national-security adviser David Aaron. Aaron and the Post denied that he was the source, and Carter ordered the FBI to investigate.

Tipped: Critics also saw the fine hand of Jimmy Carter behind the disclosure of the new U.S. strategy for a limited nuclear war. Picking up hints from an unnamed source, The Boston Globe pieced together the story last July and officials later confirmed it. White House aides claimed that Brown had planned to announce it officially all along.

Carter has clearly been the target of some leaks. Quoting official documents—one obtained from Carter "political opponents"—The New York Times last week reported that the United States is so short of plutonium that the new MX, cruise and Trident submarine missiles probably cannot be deployed on schedule. The Times detailed disputes between officials over whether to expand U.S. plutonium production, at a time when Carter has urged other countries to cut back.

Leaks sometimes turn up in unlikely places. The Daily Oklahoman, for example, was the first to reveal the existence of a new super-secret classification, known as "Royal," for especially sensitive material. Reporter Jack Taylor quoted sources



Clip job: A rash of recent disclosures, rumors and mysterious memos

charging that Royal would mainly protect politically sensitive information, and that it had already been used on a document in which Libyan officials described Billy Carter as "our agent of influence." White House aides confirmed the new classification, but denied that it had been used for political purposes. To some newsmen, the tactic was clear: get a sympathetic publication to peddle your line, thus forcing the Administration into a denial that confirms part of the story and gives the untrue claims wider circulation.

Memos: Some leaks sound totally fabricated. A mysterious memo circulating around Capitol Hill alleges that the Sixth Fleet canceled maneuvers in the Mediterranean because of pressures brought by Billy Carter for his Libyan friends. Another—accompanied by persistent rumors—charges that a senior staff member of the National Security Council got drunk at a party and let slip information that led to the unmasking of a CIA spy in the Kremlin. White House aides suspect that the memos are coming from Congress. "There's a printing press going up there," charges one official.

The rash of leaks poses problems for the press. Reporters must determine which leaks are accurate and try to assess the political motivation behind them. Some news organizations have refused to print disclosures they could not verify independently; several newspapers, for example, balked at running a Jack Anderson column last month alleging that the Administration had plans to invade Iran. Other times, the press has held back accurate information that would have jeopardized national security. "We've gotten to the point," marveled the head of one intelligence agency last week, "where reporters are behaving more responsibly in handling classified material than government officials."

MELINDA BECK with DAVID C. MARTIN in Washington